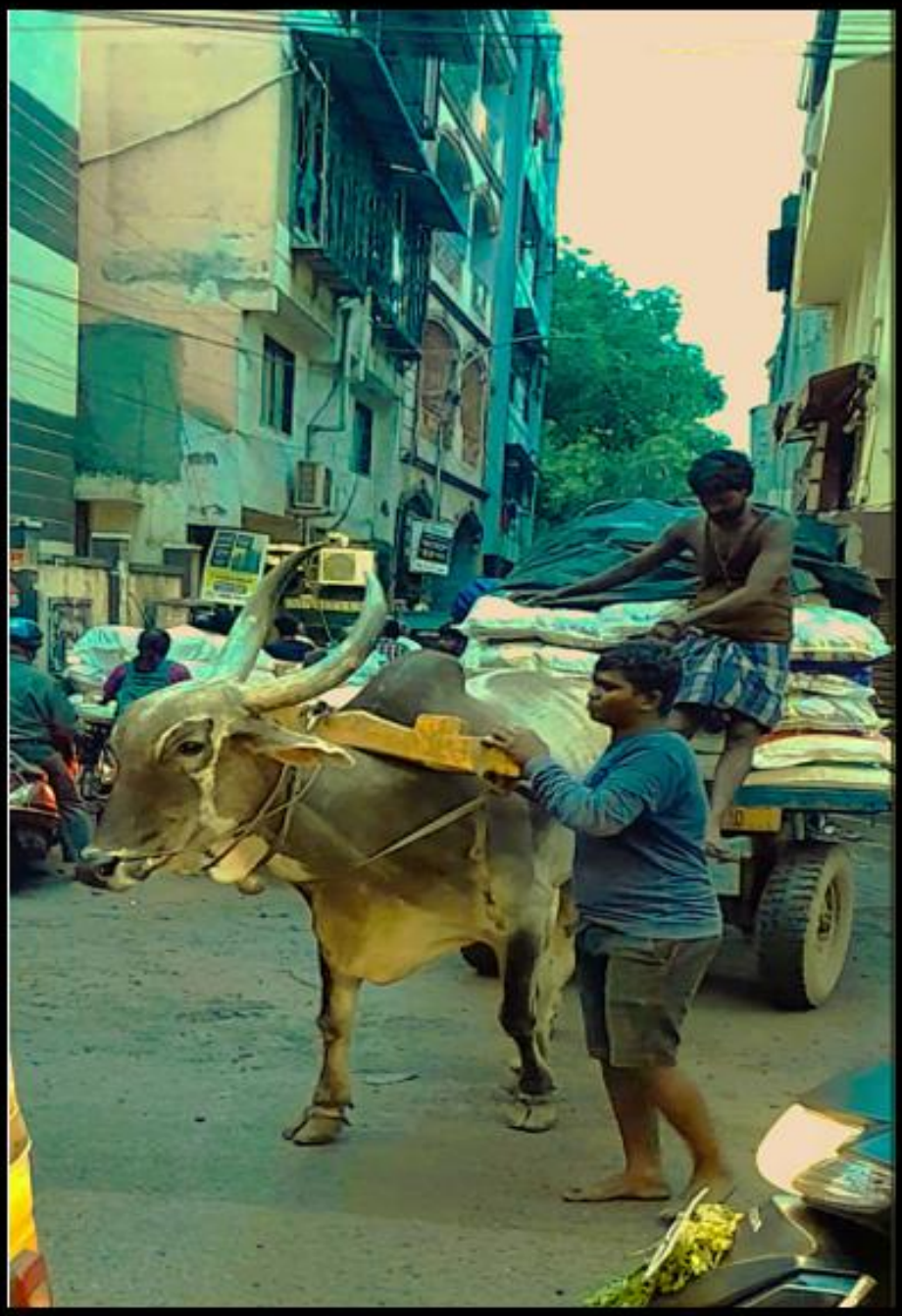
Seeds of Sovereignty

India's Street Markets and Food Localisation



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About the Author

Colin Todhunter is an independent researcher and writer and has spent many years in India. He is a research associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (Montreal) and usually writes on food, agriculture and development issues. In 2018, in recognition of his writing, he was named a Living Peace and Justice Leader and Model by Engaging Peace Inc.

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Introduction

This open access e-book tells a story through low-resolution street photography. Combining text and images, it explores the crucial role of India's decentralised urban fruit and vegetable markets in providing accessible and affordable nutrition, especially as corporate consolidation increasingly threatens traditional food systems.

The photo essay features 30 screenshots taken from handheld phone videos (shot on a basic Samsung device) recorded between 2023 and 2025. These images capture everyday scenes from markets in Bhopal, Chennai, Jodhpur, Udaipur and Jaipur.

Regardless of their lower quality, the images are raw and serendipitous, presenting life as it unfolds naturally.

This work forms part of the author's broader open access writing (books and articles) on food sovereignty, agriculture and development. Visit:

https://figshare.com/authors/Colin_Todhunter/21220973

Fruit and vegetable market (Udaipur 2025)

Streetside fruit and vegetable markets are a defining feature of India’s urban landscape. Whether sprawling along city arteries or tucked into narrow alleys, these markets play a central role in the daily lives of millions. Their enduring presence reflects not only cultural tradition but also the adaptability and resilience of India’s decentralised food systems in the face of rapid urban change.

Fruit and vegetable market (Udaipur 2025)

These markets are a cornerstone of the informal economy. More than 10 million street vendors contribute an estimated 14% to India’s urban GDP, according to the National Association of Street Vendors of India (2018). The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act 2014 provides legal recognition and protection, explicitly including fruit and vegetable sellers among those entitled to vend from pavements and roadsides. This legal framework is essential for safeguarding livelihoods and supporting local food access.

Roadside cart (Jaipur 2025)

Street vendors often operate with minimal capital, yet their collective impact on food security and nutrition is substantial. They offer affordable, diverse and nutritious foods—leafy greens, legumes and seasonal fruits—making them especially vital for low-income households. In a country where approximately 40% of households lack refrigeration, the daily availability of fresh produce is not merely a convenience but a necessity.

जरी सेल

Pavement pitch: decentralised food retail (Jaipur 2025)

Research by the Food and Agriculture Organization and initiatives such as Fish4Food highlight the critical role of small-scale traders in urban food security. These vendors are the backbone of ‘territorial markets’—short, local supply chains that help keep urban India fed. Their operations support not only consumers but also smallholder farmers, many of whom rely on direct or cooperative links with urban vendors to sustain their livelihoods.

MBT

Garlic: rooted in culinary traditions and Ayurvedic medicine (Udaipur 2025)

The preference for daily, small-quantity purchases and unpackaged produce is deeply rooted in both cultural tradition and socio-economic realities. For many Indian households, frequent market visits are a practical response to limited refrigeration and fluctuating incomes. These habits also reflect a broader cultural emphasis on freshness and flexibility. The act of shopping is often a social ritual, reinforcing relationships with local vendors and fostering community cohesion. This system allows buyers to specify exact quantities, avoid unnecessary packaging and adapt to changing prices and needs.

Woman shopping at kirana store (Jodhpur 2025)

Streetside markets and neighbourhood kirana stores also play a role in preserving dietary diversity. By offering fresh, minimally processed foods, they provide a counterweight to the rising tide of ultra-processed products. In regions such as Tamil Nadu, for example, millet porridge vendors source grains from local farmers, supporting traditional crops and contributing to nutritional security.

ECO
Tide

Abundance overload (Jodhpur 2025)

Many of these markets can trace their roots to ancient haats—weekly village bazaars that have evolved into today's urban hubs. They are more than commercial spaces; they are social theatres where trust and community bonds are built. The produce on display often reflects regional specialties and seasonal cycles, underscoring the deep connections between food, culture and ecology.

Fresh produce for the city's 12 million inhabitants (Chennai 2024)

India's rapid urbanisation has brought significant challenges. In several states, rural and urban populations are now nearly equal, and the expansion of cities has led to the steady loss of peri-urban farmland. This trend has important environmental implications. Peri-urban agriculture supports biodiversity, recharges groundwater and maintains soil health. Its loss increases the risk of urban flooding, water scarcity and the decline of pollinators and beneficial insects. These ecological services are critical for sustainable urban living, and their erosion makes cities more vulnerable to climate shocks and food insecurity.

Pyramids of Chennai (2024)

Longer supply chains are another consequence of urban expansion. Up to 35% of fruits and vegetables are wasted before reaching consumers, due to inadequate cold storage and transportation infrastructure. The shift towards monocultures and industrial agriculture, often driven by the demands of distant urban markets, further undermines food diversity and resilience.

அம்பிகா புரொவிஷன்ஸ்
AMBICA PROVISIONS
CLASSICAL DRY FRUITS, PROVISIONS & BAKERY ITEMS.
WE ACCEPT ALL MAJOR CREDIT CARDS

Jewellery and produce (Udaipur 2025)

Smaller cities, by contrast, tend to maintain stronger rural-urban linkages, enabling faster transport of fresh produce and reducing spoilage. This suggests that policies supporting local markets and peri-urban agriculture can play a role in enhancing both food security and environmental sustainability.

Onion vendor (Udaipur 2025)

The food retail landscape in India is undergoing rapid transformation. Organised retail chains and online grocery platforms—such as Reliance Retail, Tata Group, DMart, BigBasket and Amazon Fresh—are expanding aggressively. These players leverage extensive supply networks and economies of scale to offer discounts and convenience that are difficult for small vendors to match. Their rise is most pronounced among higher-income, urban households, who are attracted by the convenience, product range and aspirational branding of modern retail.

Inside a ‘mom and pop’ kirana store

(Udaipur 2025)

However, this shift is not uniform. Recent studies indicate that lower- and middle-income groups continue to rely on local markets and kirana stores for affordability, credit access and personalised service. The flexibility to buy in small quantities and the familiarity of local vendors remain decisive factors for many consumers. At the same time, exposure to digital payment systems and targeted advertising is gradually influencing shopping habits, particularly among younger consumers and in metropolitan areas. This hybrid approach—using online platforms for non-perishables and local markets for fresh produce—reflects the adaptability of Indian consumers but also signals a potential long-term transformation in food retail.

Annkoot
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Nutrition Facts
बनियान
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पेन्टीज

Small roadside pitch to supplement household income (Chennai 2023)

The expansion of organised retail and e-commerce has implications for smallholder farmers and local supply chains. Large retailers often source produce from industrial farms, bypassing traditional networks. This can erode the livelihoods of small vendors and farmers, reduce food diversity and increase dependence on distant suppliers.

Bhopal 2025

Winding through the streets of the city to get fresh produce from farm to table. Their either have their own pitch or will sell to traders or directly to vendors

MP 04
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HUB

Young women enter the fruit and veg market (Bhopal 2025)

Produce arrives from local farm to local customer. Small-scale enterprises still feed most of the Indian population. And let’s not forget that much of the produce available in these markets, from ash gourd, and pomegranate to beetroot, garlic and baby onions, are valued not just for wholesome nutrition but for their healing properties. The influence of Ayurveda—India’s ancient system of holistic medicine—still lingers in food choices.

Back lane fruit and veg market (Chennai 2023)

The risks associated with corporate consolidation are not unique to India. In the United States, the dominance of companies such as Amazon and Walmart has contributed to the closure of thousands of small stores and the creation of “food deserts” in many communities. The US House Judiciary Committee has documented how these platforms use data and market power to disadvantage smaller competitors. Similar trends are emerging in India, where the expansion of e-commerce giants and large retail chains threatens to homogenise food choices and undermine local food systems.

MADHARSHA GROUP
மதார்ஷா

Kirana store (Chennai 2024)

Despite these challenges, India's traditional markets and small kirana shops continue to adapt. Grassroots initiatives, policy interventions and technological innovations are helping local food systems survive and evolve. Many vendors are forming cooperatives or self-help groups to pool resources, negotiate better prices and advocate for improved infrastructure. In cities such as Mumbai and Bengaluru, vendor associations have successfully lobbied for designated vending zones and better market facilities.

Affordable and convenient (Chennai 2024)

Some vendors are embracing technology, using platforms like Jumbotail, ShopKirana and Udaan for digital ordering and logistics support. WhatsApp groups and local delivery apps enable traditional vendors to offer home delivery while maintaining personal relationships with customers. These adaptations demonstrate the capacity of local markets to innovate and respond to changing conditions.

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Small back lane market (Chennai 2024)

The Street Vendors Act of 2014 remains a cornerstone for protecting vendors' rights and regulating urban vending. While implementation is uneven, advocacy groups continue to push for better enforcement. In cities such as Chennai and Kolkata, market modernisation projects have helped retain footfall and improve vendor incomes. Legal action has also played a role, with court rulings upholding vendors' rights and mandating inclusive urban planning.

Coming together (Chennai 2024)

At the core of these developments is the principle of food sovereignty—the right of communities to define their own food systems and agricultural policies. Streetside markets empower communities, support sustainable and culturally appropriate diets and reduce reliance on industrial supply chains. They provide livelihoods for millions and help preserve India’s rich culinary heritage.

WOW
OFFER!

Grapes of Chennai (2024)

The future of India’s food system will depend on how cities balance the pressures of modernisation with the need to preserve local autonomy, ecological health and cultural diversity. Strengthening streetside markets and community-controlled food systems is not simply a matter of tradition; it is essential for building resilient, inclusive and healthy urban environments.

Wholesale mangoes (Bhopal 2025)

As India’s food landscape continues to evolve, the choices made today—between corporate consolidation and community resilience, between standardisation and diversity—will shape the well-being of future generations. Ensuring that streetside markets remain a vital part of this landscape is not only a question of economic policy, but of social justice and the nation’s health.

Wholesale yard (Bhopal 2025)

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SRI SAKTHI ROADWAYS
VASANTHI
अकुल
83197 13925
Yatri

Pulses, Spices and more in kirana stores (Udaipur 2025)

NO-10
NO-3
Amulspray
Amulspray
Jaggery
Black Salt
UPKAR
SPICES
TURMERIC POWDER

Streetside produce (Chennai 2024)

வெற்றிலை வியாபரம்
PREM TRADERS
PREM TRADERS

Transporting produce through the back lanes (Chennai 2024)

Frightening fruit (dragon fruit) (Chennai 2023)

A 'big whack'

Lifeblood of the back lanes (Chennai 2024)

VEERA's

Mobile Fruit (Chennai 2023)